



University of Tennessee, Knoxville
**Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative
Exchange**

University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects

University of Tennessee Honors Program

Spring 5-1999

Fast Times: The Rise and Fall of the Teen Romantic Comedies of the 1980s

Erin Nicole Ford

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj

Recommended Citation

Ford, Erin Nicole, "Fast Times: The Rise and Fall of the Teen Romantic Comedies of the 1980s" (1999). *University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects*.

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/307

This is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Tennessee Honors Program at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Erin Ford
College: Arts & Sciences Department: Psychology
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Charles Maland
PROJECT TITLE: Fast Times: The Rise and Fall
of the Teen Romantic Comedies of the 1980s

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Charles J. Maland, Faculty Mentor

Date: May 5, 1999

Comments (Optional):

It's been a pleasure to work with Erin Ford on her Honors Project for the University Honors Program. Her work, "Fast Times: The Rise and Fall of the Teen Romantic Comedy of the 1980s," took her into the areas of film and cultural studies, and I believe it constituted a very successful undergraduate research project.

Erin started with a quite general interest in films aimed primarily at a teen audience in the 1980s. She did a good bit of background reading on the emergence of teen films in the 1950s and 1960s, just as the studio system and the rather undifferentiated mass audience for films were breaking down, and the film industry responded by targeting their films to narrower audiences.

After doing the background reading, she narrowed her topic still further when she noticed that "teen films" was a broad category that included movies in a variety of different genres, including horror/slasher films, what one critic called "gross-out comedies," and the romantic comedies that she decided to focus on.

Erin also made good use of genre theory to help structure her project, drawing particularly on the work of John Cawelti and Thomas Schatz, both of whom have made major contributions to our understanding of the cultural significance of popular film genres and literary formulas. I was impressed with the way that Erin could work independently after our discussions and my suggestions of readings to do. She showed a keen intelligence in reading, comprehending, weighing, and making use of the readings and topics I had suggested that she explore. She was also responsive and effective in making revisions when I suggested them.

Overall, then, I was pleased with Erin's work and approve it as a fine senior honors thesis. Let me offer her my congratulations for her good work.

Charles J. Maland

Fast Times: The Rise and Fall of the Teen Romantic Comedies of the 1980s
by Erin Ford
Senior Honors Project
Spring 1999

Teen films have been around as long as there has been a group of people known as “teenagers,” since roughly the mid-50s. Films made especially for teens were extremely popular during the 1980s. These films took on many different forms, several of which, such as the horror film and the gross-out comedy, were continuations of forms that had been around for several years or even decades. Yet a certain group of these films took a slightly different form. This group of films told teen love stories, but with humor. This paper takes a look at this particular group of teen films from the 1980s.

One method that is useful in the study of film is the genre approach. Using this approach, a researcher looks at how a particular formula of visual and narrative conventions is repeated in a similar group of films. As Schatz puts it: “Simply stated, a genre film . . . involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting” (6). Some genres include the western, the musical, and the gangster film. Genres are defined by such conventions as a familiar set of characters (the small ranchers, the cattle barons, and the outlaws of the western), story lines (the ranchers versus the cattle barons), and settings (the ranches, the saloons). A specific genre will also have its own more-detailed conventions, such as the music used in the score, the style of dress, the speech dialect used, and the lighting. All of these different elements go into making a genre film and later identifying it as such.

But a question arises - why study genre? According to Cawelti, there are two different purposes for studying literary formulas. These can also be applied to the study of genre films. First, this approach allows the researcher to trace cultural and historical patterns. Secondly, it is useful for the study of a particular film's inventiveness within the set pattern of a genre.

A study of genre provides insight into a particular culture because each genre's conventions are partly determined by the culture that consumes it. Schatz describes this interaction between the creation and the consumption of a genre in this way: "If it is initially a popular success, a film story is reworked in later movies and repeated until it reaches its equilibrium profile - until it becomes a spatial, sequential, and thematic pattern of familiar actions and relationships. Such a repetition is generated by the interaction of the studios and the mass audience, and it will be sustained so long as it satisfies the needs and expectations of the audience and remains financially viable for the studios" (10). Schatz later goes into more detail to describe this cycle which he considers typical of a genre. First there is a film that is somehow new and different from the already established genres. It may not be a production completely devoid of generic touches, but in some way it differs from what came before. If this film is a commercial success it will inspire repetitions of its formula because the movie studios consider it a fairly safe bet to make money from the same type of film: "For publishers or film studios, the production of formulaic works is a highly rationalized operation with a guaranteed minimal return as well as the possibility of large profits for particularly popular individual versions" (Cawelti 9).

After several repetitions of the formula taken from the initial successful film, the conventions of the new genre are established, and the genre enters what Schatz calls its “classical stage.” At this stage, each film in the genre contains some variation of the established pattern. While each film has some unique take on the formula, they all contain many of the established conventions of the genre. Unfortunately, after a certain amount of time the genre films being released may not contain much originality, and virtually the same film is released over and over. At this point, other filmmakers may mock the overuse of the genre by making parodies, using the genre’s conventions in a twisted way. When the genre has come this far in its cycle, the audience often begins to tire of it and stops going to see each new genre film being released. As the audience for a genre begins to dwindle, the studios’ interest in the genre also fades. Without the studio or audience support, the genre eventually ends completely, or at least until a new film uses the conventions in a refreshing way and injects new life into the genre (Schatz 38).

A central reason that film studios produce genre films is clear: to make money. But why are genre films so popular with the audience? Cawelti proposes that formulaic stories in general, such as fairy tales, provide a safe escape for the reader, or in the case of film, the viewer (1). The familiarity of the formula gives the viewer a sense of security when seeing a new film in a certain genre. To a certain extent the viewer knows what to expect, including the pleasure that he or she usually receives from the familiar genre. The safety of the conventions of the formula allows the viewer to enjoy with little risk the unique innovations of an individual film within the genre. While the familiarity

of the formulaic story is necessary, the innovation keeps the formula going. “To be a work of any quality or interest, the individual version of a formula must have some unique or special characteristics of its own, yet these characteristics must ultimately work toward the fulfillment of the conventional form” (Cawelti 10). The viewer does seek an element of safety in his or her viewing experiences, but he or she also seeks to escape from everyday life. Novelty provides that escape. The best genre films provide a maximum amount of excitement while still staying within the boundaries of the reality created by the genre’s conventions (Cawelti 34).

Throughout the history of narratives, certain archetypal story patterns have fulfilled the human needs for pleasure and escape. “But in order for these patterns to work, they must be embodied in figures, settings, and situations that have appropriate meanings for the culture which produces them . . .” (Cawelti 6). The culture that creates a genre takes a traditional story and mixes it with elements that are meaningful to that culture. In this way, the formulaic story becomes a reality to this particular culture. The teen film genre is a unique genre, in that the members of the culture for which it is intended are not the people actually making the films that are supposed to depict their reality (Shary 40). Instead, adults make teen films. But this does not mean that teenagers do not in some way have an influence over the genre that is created for them. The teen audience, like any other audience, is able to communicate with the filmmakers about what it wants to see through ticket sales. When teenagers are interested in a film that has been released, they pay to see it, and when they are bored with the form the teen film genre is taking, they don’t buy any more tickets. Through the teen audience’s consumer

decisions, the studios are able to gain some knowledge of what the audience wants from a film. In this way, teenagers help make the movies about themselves (Schatz 5).

Although targeting the teen audience is a common practice of the film industry today, this was not always the case. Even up to the mid-1950s the film audience was considered one mass audience, consisting of people of all ages and classes. According to Doherty, "By and large moviegoing *was* a familial, almost ritualistic activity, with children, adolescents, young couples, housewives, breadwinners, and the elderly partaking together..." (2-3). At this time, the movie studios made movies for this mixed audience. While there were films with prominent teen characters, such as the Andy Hardy series of the late 30s starring Mickey Rooney, they were intended more for the whole family, rather than just the adolescents. In these films, Andy's father, Judge Hardy, plays an important role, and the first film even has the title *A Family Affair* (Reed 137-8). While teens may have been more interested in these films than their parents, the movie studios were not yet exclusively pursuing teens as a separate audience.

The film industry continued to perceive the film-going public as one mass audience until around 1955, when it became necessary for the industry to change its attitude and start focusing on the teen audience as its own entity. Several different factors led to this change. One important factor was the invention of the television. Rather than going to the trouble and expense of venturing out to the cinema, viewers could now stay at home and be entertained by the television instead. In order to compete with the television, film studios often tried new technology, such as 3-D and various

widescreen methods. However, none of these methods was very successful in bringing more people to the theaters, so the studios had to try something different: find a group that still had the desire to leave the house for entertainment (Doherty 3). Teenagers fit this category because going to the theater provided them with a place to go to get away from the rest of the family.

But the invention of the television is not the only reason for the film industry's interest in teenagers. Another important factor is the entire country's interest in that particular age group. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, birth rates in the United States took a dramatic dip. But near the end of the decade, and continuing through World War II, the rates rose. In the mid-50s, these children became the first "teenagers" (Doherty 45). Teenagers acquired this new label because they were a group different from past adolescents.

This group of adolescents was unique for a couple of reasons. For one, there were many more of them than in past generations. Secondly, the economic boom of the post-war years created an environment previously unseen in the U.S. Parents could now provide well for their children, and having faced the horrors of the Depression, they were even more inclined to do so. This situation left teens with fewer responsibilities, such as helping to provide for the family, and more privileges, such as allowance and free time. Cultural and sociological studies were conducted on this new group of people, and American industry took note. Financial studies showed that teenagers spent the majority of their money, made from allowances and part-time jobs, on entertainment. The music

business quickly tapped into this trend by developing the sound of rock and roll. But because of the need to lure audiences away from the television, the film industry stood to gain the most from the teen audience (Doherty 45-6).

As mentioned before, teens, unlike most of the audience of the 50s, still went to the cinema rather than just staying at home and watching television. They also had the time to go to the theater. But even more importantly to the studios, teens now had the means with which to buy tickets. Being able to produce a movie that teens would pay to see could lead to big money for a studio, especially since with the baby boom the teen audience was going to continue to grow. In order to make money off teens, the studios had to determine the type of movies that appealed to them. What they found was that teenagers liked to watch movies about themselves, leading to the development of the teen film genre.

Two of the most famous teen films of all time, *The Wild One* (Laslo Benedeck, 1954) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), were released just as the first teenagers were emerging. Not only were these films successful, showing that the teen audience was a force to be reckoned with, but they also showcased some of the decade's biggest teen idols, Marlon Brando and James Dean. The images of Brando and Dean came to symbolize the rebelliousness of their characters in these films. Rebellion, a central theme in these early films, has been an issue throughout the teen genre.

Teens gained privileges in the 1950s, but also faced disadvantages. The increased duration of teens as children could lead them to feel dependent on their parents and to

rebel against them. Perhaps the success of *Wild One* and *Rebel* had to do with the teenagers' attitudes in the characters portrayed by Brando and Dean. Teenagers were able to connect with the films and therefore escape from their everyday lives. Even more importantly perhaps, the films allowed them to experience the rebellion safely. They could see Brando and Dean confront their problems rather than deal with their own at home. However, what is interesting to note about these films is that they are made by adults, the very people against whom the teens want to rebel. This fact is shown in the outcomes of the films. In each case, the main character fights against adult authority, but in the end, authority is regained, whether in the form of parental control or law and order (Lewis 3). Teens might have reconsidered living out their rebellious fantasies after seeing these films.

The rebellion theme continued through the teen films of the 60s, and another theme common to the teen film genre was also dealt with more openly: sex. There were several reasons that sex became such an issue in the 60s. For one, in 1960, the FDA approved distribution of the birth-control pill, thereby decreasing the fear of unwanted pregnancies and leading up to what became known as the Sexual Revolution. Another factor in the increasing appearance of sex in films during the 60s was the film studios' continued attempt to attract more viewers to the theaters. As the saying goes, "Sex sells." During the 60s, the Hollywood Production Code, which had determined the moral standards to which films should adhere since 1934, began to loosen until in 1966 *Variety* declared, "The Code Is Dead." In 1968 it was abandoned entirely, replaced with a

ratings system similar to the one in force today (Douglas 61, 72). Without the code, filmmakers had greater freedom to show what they wanted in their films, including sex.

Sex has continued to be a dominant subject of teen films over the years, including the 1970s. Two of the forms of the teen film genre which used sex as a driving force, the slasher film and the gross-out comedy, became popular near the end of the decade. The treatment of sex was taken to different extremes in these subgenres of teen film. In the slasher films those teenagers who resisted sexual temptation were often rewarded by managing to survive to the end of the film, while in the gross-out comedy, the most important goal for the teen characters was often to lose their virginity (Paul 196). The teen film genre in these two forms continued through the 80s, but as Schatz pointed out, in order for a genre to remain popular it must keep changing to appeal to its audience, and these subgenres soon became worn out. Therefore, the teen film took a new direction beginning in the early 80s that continued through the decade.

The rest of this paper will explore this new form of the teen film: the teen romantic comedy. First will be a brief overview of the history of the teen romantic comedy during the 80s, from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling) in 1982 through *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin) in 1990. The next part of the discussion will be a look at the conventions of the teen romantic comedy subgenre. After the conventions of the subgenre have been identified, the next step will be to look at the reasons for the rise of the teen romantic comedy during the 1980s, both why the studios made the films

and why the audience was eager to see them. This section will include the cultural significance of the subgenre.

Most genres are defined by the narrative characteristics that the films share with one another. The teen film genre is unique in that, while it does have certain narrative similarities, its categorization depends more on the group of people for and about whom the films are made (Shary 39). A theory has been proposed that while most teen films share certain conventions, such as the prom, the shopping mall, and an alienated teen hero, they all borrow their narrative qualities from other genres (Speed 26). In the case of teen films of the 80s, a new form of teen film emerged, drawing on narrative conventions of the romantic comedy.

In earlier teen films, teenagers were seeking independence from their parents and often, sexual intercourse. In these new films, the main characters are seeking true love rather than just the act of sex. As in adult romantic comedies, various obstacles, such as romantic triangles, arise on the way to the attainment of the ultimate romantic goal. The comedy portion of the genre is often achieved through certain humorous characters in each film.

As the label indicates, the teen romantic comedies of the 1980s are actually a subgenre of both the teen film and romantic comedy genres. The subgenre does fit Schatz' pattern for the life cycle of a genre as discussed earlier. In review: a genre begins with one film that is somehow different from other film genres and is successful at the box office. After this initial success, copycat films come along and experiment with the

first film's formula, until the conventions of the genre are established and the genre enters into its classical stage. During the classical stage, the films within the genre reinforce its conventions and ideology. As the formula of the genre becomes apparent, the classical stage ends and the genre enters into the stage of refinement, in which the conventions are refined and eventually parodied. At any point in the cycle of a genre that it is no longer successful, it may die out. This often occurs after the stage of refinement because the formula becomes so familiar that exceptional creativity is needed to keep the genre fresh and interesting (Schatz 38).

In 1982, the first film of the teen romantic comedy subgenre, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, was released. This film was a clear continuation of the teen film genre, containing many of the same elements, like central teen characters, high school setting, etc., but it also established some of the newer elements, such as the shopping mall setting, absent or ineffective authority figures, and the search for love. One reviewer called *Fast Times*, "the first of the great dumb mall-generation movies" (Cowin 48).

The strong emphasis on sex found in the gross-out comedies, such as *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1982), is also an important element in *Fast Times*. (That is one of the meanings behind the "fast times" in the title, after all.) But *Fast Times* puts several twists on the traditional treatment of sex in teen films, perhaps in part because it was directed by a woman. First, it is the film's *female*, rather than male, lead character, Stacy (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who is determined to lose her virginity. Second, sex is treated in a more serious manner in *Fast Times* than just a teen fantasy. When Stacy does lose her

virginity, she confides in her more experienced friend Linda (Phoebe Cates) that it was painful, and after another awkward sexual encounter Stacy becomes pregnant and chooses to have an abortion. In the gross-out films, the consequences of the sexual act are not of concern to the plot. By the end of the film, Stacy has decided to stop searching for sexual experience, opting instead for a romantic relationship with a boy she spurned earlier in the film because he did not seem interested in her sexually.

Although in comparison to *Porky's*, which had a domestic gross of \$53.5 million, *Fast Times* was only a moderate success, at \$14 million, it showed that this different type of teen film could be worthwhile ("Big Rental Films of 1982" 13). *Fast Times* was also lauded by critics, unlike many teen films. Critic Jack Kroll wrote, "The movie is friendly and funny, with . . . some astonishing work by Heckerling" (92).

Following close on the heels of *Fast Times* was 1983's *Valley Girl*, directed by Martha Coolidge. *Valley Girl*, like *Fast Times*, was about teenagers in California who spend a lot of time at the local mall, but it made some changes to the earlier film's formula. Whereas in *Fast Times* the screen time was split among several different characters, in *Valley Girl* the focus is on the title heroine, Julie (Deborah Foreman), and her love interest, Randy (Nicolas Cage). The emphasis on sex is moved further toward an emphasis on finding true love in this film as well. While sex is still present in the film, it is the search for happiness in love that is most important. Julie and Randy, like Stacy and Mark (Brian Backer) in *Fast Times*, have finally committed to a relationship at the end of the film, but they have not yet consummated it. The main obstacle to true love

in this film, as in many following teen romantic comedies, is social class. Julie is from the Valley, and Randy is from Hollywood. Because of these geographical differences, the two teens are not supposed to be together. This idea of a high school social caste system reappears in several teen romantic comedies as a threat to the couples' happiness. Julie and Randy also seem to be from different socioeconomic classes, but this difference is not made explicit. While Julie's parents are important characters in the film and some of the action is set in her home, Randy's family and home are never shown. So the possible socioeconomic difference between the two teens can only be guessed from certain status symbols, such as clothing and cars, which seem to show that Julie is from a wealthier family than Randy. *Valley Girl* was only about half as successful as *Fast Times*, but in combination with other films like *Risky Business* and *The Outsiders*, released in the same year, it showed that the teen film genre was still viable.

In 1984, a new director appeared on the teen film scene with a film that had a great impact on the teen romantic comedy subgenre. The director was John Hughes, the film *Sixteen Candles*. Hughes took the developing subgenre into its classical stage, in which the established conventions are reinforced. Hughes sealed the conventions of the subgenre in *Sixteen Candles* and further reinforced them in his later teen films. In *Sixteen Candles*, Hughes centers the plot on the main character Samantha's (Molly Ringwald) quest to date the man of her dreams, Jake (Michael Schoeffling), not her desire to have sex with him. Sex is mentioned at times and occasionally implied, but never actually shown. Hughes is more interested in romance. Once again, the high school caste system adds to the various forces keeping Sam and Jake apart, because Sam

is only a sophomore from a middle class family, while Jake is a senior from an upper class family.

At this point, all the teen films being released may have begun to seem like overkill to some people, particularly director Savage Steve Holland, who released his first film in 1985, *Better Off Dead*, which had a darker view of the genre. While this plot is also about the hero's search for true love, it contains a twist. After the hero, Lane (John Cusack), is dumped by his girlfriend Beth (Amanda Wyss), he unsuccessfully attempts suicide several times. Through his use of black comedy, Holland focuses on the comedic, rather than romantic, element of the subgenre. Unfortunately for Holland, the audience was evidently not ready for such a dark look at teen romantic comedy though. The film was not a critical or box office success (in fact, it was labeled a "flop" in *Film Comment's* annual "Grosses Gloss" of the films released in 1985), and the teen film genre continued with the conventions it had developed prior to *Better Off Dead* (Thompson, "10th Annual..." 66).

After brief forays in 1985 into the areas of drama (*The Breakfast Club*) and science fiction (*Weird Science*) within the teen film genre, John Hughes returned to romantic comedy by writing *Pretty in Pink* in 1986, while passing on the directing responsibilities to first-time director Howard Deutch. This film, also starring Molly Ringwald, deals with the caste system of high school, as did *Valley Girl*. In this case, Andie, who is from the wrong side of the tracks, falls in love with Blane (Andrew

McCarthy), who is from a rich family, and none of the fellow classmates think they belong together.

Pretty in Pink was probably the most successful of the teen romantic comedies, grossing \$16.6 million at the box office and making *Film Comment*'s list of hit films (Thompson, "12th Annual..." 68). After this boost several more teen romantic comedies were released, including *Can't Buy Me Love* (Steve Rash) in 1987 and *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe) in 1989. But by this time the subgenre was beginning to die. While *Can't Buy Me Love* was a hit at the box office, it did not fare well with critics (Thompson, "13th Annual..." 60). On the other hand, *Say Anything*, written and directed by Cameron Crowe, who also wrote *Fast Times*, was praised by critics. But, evidently the audience was not as enthusiastic, because the film only generated enough business at the box office to qualify as a "recouper" (Thompson, "15th Annual..." 62).

So, by 1989, the end of the teen romantic comedy seemed near - the perfect time for another parody. Michael Lehmann's *Heathers* took on the social caste system found in several of the teen films. In this film, not only do the outcast and his love interest (a popular girl) stand up to the high school's social elite, they even murder some of them. With such an extreme twist on the teen romantic comedy, the subgenre seemed to be at an end. But first, one last film took on the subgenre, adding a new perspective.

House Party was a teen romantic comedy from an African-American point of view. It contained many of the subgenre's conventions, but just put a different spin on them. *House Party* was a huge critical and box office success. With such a success, it

looked as though the teen romantic comedy subgenre might be able to continue, but instead this film's success helped inspire work in another area of filmmaking, African-American films. In fact, even the sequel to *House Party* did not continue the subgenre - the cast had moved on to college, leaving the high school world of teen romantic comedies behind.

From *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* in 1982 through *House Party* in 1990, the teen romantic comedy subgenre follows Schatz' pattern for the typical life cycle of a genre. Within each film of the subgenre, do the conventions come together in the way Schatz outlines a genre film's formula? He writes:

Thus, we might describe the plot structure of a genre film in the following way:

establishment (via various narrative and iconographic cues) of the generic community with its inherent dramatic conflicts;

animation of those conflicts through the actions and attitudes of the genre's constellation of characters;

intensification of the conflict by means of conventional situations and dramatic confrontations until the conflict reaches crisis proportions;

resolution of the crisis in a fashion which eliminates the physical and/or ideological threat and thereby celebrates the (temporary) well-ordered community. (30)

According to Schatz, the first part of a genre film establishes that genre's community, which brings along its own inherent conflicts. The generic community in the case of the teen romantic comedy is the teen world filled with teen characters in teen settings. For example, both *Fast Times* and *Valley Girl* open with a scene at the local mall. The development of this teen world is emphasized by the use of popular music and contemporary teen lingo.

The use of popular music in teen films is as old as 1955's *The Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks), in which Bill Haley and the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" was played over the credits. But in the 1980s the use of popular music on film soundtracks became common practice: "In 1984, 10 film soundtracks sold more than a million copies - more than any previous year - and only one, *Yentl*, was not rock and roll" (McGuigan 78). The use of rock in films was effective largely because the majority of the audience had grown up on rock and roll. The introduction of music videos, which could be used as an excellent marketing tool, also added to the appeal to use popular soundtracks in films. Teen romantic comedy directors Howard Deutch (*Pretty in Pink*) and Reginald Hudlin (*House Party*) even directed music videos early in their careers (O'Connor 14; Glicksman 65). Popular music was such an integral part of John Hughes filmmaking style that he was inspired to write the script for the film *Pretty in Pink* after Molly

Ringwald introduced him to the song of the same name by the group The Psychedelic Furs during the filming of *Sixteen Candles* (Ringwald 228).

As in other films, music is used in teen romantic comedies for several reasons, such as achieving a certain mood for a scene. But one of the most important reasons for using popular music in teen romantic comedies is to help establish the teen world of the film. The soundtracks for the films are made up of songs popular with teens of the day. One of the most common ways to use popular music in these films is by playing it in the background while showing the teen characters going about their everyday activities. Several of the films establish the teen community of the films through this method right away by playing a popular song over the opening shots of the film. For instance, *Fast Times* opens with shots of teens working and hanging out at the mall while the Go-Gos' "We Got the Beat" plays. At the beginning of *Pretty in Pink*, the audience hears the title song while watching Andie in her pink bedroom putting on an outfit from her primarily pink wardrobe.

Of course, popular music is used in similar ways throughout each of the films, not just in the opening scenes. In *Valley Girl*, a montage of scenes depicting the budding romance of Randy and Julie becomes a sort of music video for Modern English's "I Melt With You." Rather than playing only a snippet of the song, as is often done with these popular tunes, Coolidge plays the entire song. Sometimes a director will choose a song as a "theme" that recurs throughout a film. For instance, Heckerling uses Jackson Browne's "Somebody's Baby" in several pivotal scenes involving Stacy. The song plays

when Stacy first meets Ron (D.W. Brown), when he picks her up for their date, and during their sexual encounter. The use of this particular song, with “baby” in the title, emphasizes 15-year-old Stacy’s youth.

All of the examples so far have been of songs used non-diegetically in the films. In other words, the audience hears the music, but it is not being heard by the characters in the film. In teen romantic comedies, music is also used diegetically, with both the audience and the characters within the scene hearing the song being played on the soundtrack. The most common way that popular music is used in this way is in scenes set at teen social gatherings, such as parties and dances. The teen characters dance to Spandau Ballet’s “True” in *Sixteen Candles* and OMD’s “If You Leave” in *Pretty in Pink* during the school dance scenes, and the list of songs played at social events in these films could go on and on.

One particularly touching use of a popular song in one of the sample films can be found in *Say Anything*. Peter Gabriel’s “In Your Eyes” is playing on Diane’s (Ione Skye) car stereo just after she and Lloyd (John Cusack) make love for the first time in her back seat, and she tells him to listen to the song. Then later in the film, during their temporary breakup, Lloyd tries to woo Diane back by playing the song on his boombox outside her window as a kind of modern-day serenade.

Popular music is especially important to the film *House Party* because the film’s stars, Kid (Christopher Reid) and Play (Christopher Martin), were celebrities as rappers before embarking on film careers. Not only is rap music played at the film’s title party,

but Kid and Play even perform some raps themselves. In one scene, Kid and Play try to impress the partygoers by participating in a rap “duel,” each trying to out-rap the other.

The use of teen dialect in the teen romantic comedy is also important for establishing the teen community of the film. Using contemporary teen dialogue adds a sense of reality to the film. The use of “Valspeak” in *Valley Girl* establishes the community in which the film is set, as well as providing some of the film’s humor. For example, the teen girls describe a particularly attractive young man as being “trippendicular,” while another who is seen in a negative light is referred to as a “pukoid.”

Hughes was especially praised for his grasp of teen dialogue. Richard Corliss wrote of Hughes, “This filmmaker is, spookily, inside kids . . . He has learned their dialect and decoded it for sympathetic adults” (“Is There Life . . .” 90). Daniel Waters, the screenwriter for *Heathers*, also gained critical praise for his ability to write believable teen dialogue. Some examples of Waters’ work include certain slang terms, such as one character explaining that she has to leave by saying, “I gotta motor,” and another referring to having sex as “jamming.”

Besides using rap music, *House Party* also employs certain rap terms to create the teen world of the film. In one rather humorous scene, Kid and one of the film’s bullies are called into the principal’s office following a fight in the lunchroom. Kid explains that he fought the bully because he insulted Kid’s deceased mother by calling her a “ho.” The principal misunderstands the teenager’s use of this abbreviated form of the word

“whore” and asks the bully why he called Kid’s mother a garden tool. This example shows how the use of teen dialect allows the teen characters to separate themselves from the adults in the films.

Along with the generic community that is established in the teen romantic comedy comes its inherent conflicts. The conflicts inherent to this teen world include the quests for love, fun, and popularity. Since these films are romantic comedies, the ultimate goal for the central character is always love. Sex may be a secondary goal, but love is what matters the most in the end. For instance, even though Stacy in *Fast Times* is intent on gaining sexual knowledge throughout the film, she ends up with Mark, with whom she has not “gone all the way,” because he is the boy who really cares about her. When Kid in *House Party* has the opportunity to make love with his romantic interest Sidney (Tisha Campbell), he refrains because they have no form of protection at the time. When describing the incident later to a disbelieving Play, Kid makes it clear that he would rather wait than be sorry. In this case, the hero’s goal is proved to be love rather than merely the sex which he had in his reach. Along with sex, fun and popularity are other secondary goals in the films. They may seem to be very important at times to the characters in the films, but they find that ultimately love is most important.

Once the generic community and its conflicts have been established, these conflicts are animated, or put into motion, through the actions and attitudes of the various characters in the films. In teen romantic comedies, the character constellation is very important because of the role that the high school caste system plays in each film. In

each of the films the high schools have a certain caste system, made up of stereotypical categories such as jocks, nerds, stoners, richies, the “in” crowd, and losers, and perhaps also set up according to grade level. For instance, in *Sixteen Candles*, Sam is an average girl and Jake is a jock, but even more importantly, she is a sophomore and he is a senior. Jake is considered unattainable for Sam because he is out of her league according to the caste system. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Ronald (Patrick Dempsey) is a nerd who falls for popular cheerleader Cindy (Amanda Peterson). Social class possibly plays the biggest role in *Pretty in Pink*, in which Blane and Andie are kept apart simply because he is rich and she is not. In the parody of teen romantic comedies, *Heathers*, this caste system is criticized by Veronica (Winona Ryder) and her beau J.D. (Christian Slater), who eventually murder one of the popular Heathers and two football jocks in an attempt to teach the popular students at the school a lesson.

The conflicts of the teen romantic comedies arise when the relationship of the central romantic couple threatens the status quo of the high school caste system. For the most part, these conflicts are perpetuated by the students who cling to this caste system. In *Say Anything*, Lloyd's friends try to discourage him from pursuing Diane because she's in the smart crowd that they are not a part of. As his best friend Corey (Lili Taylor) explains, “Brains stay with brains. The bomb could go off, and their mutant genes would form the same cliques.” She is afraid that Diane will reject Lloyd, leaving him heartbroken. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Ronald's original motive for dating Cindy is the hope that being her boyfriend will make him popular by association. Ronald must first shed his nerd image in order for the cool crowd to accept him into their circle. Once he

has been accepted, he is considered worthy enough to date Cindy and the other popular girls at the school. The conflict over the caste system is carried on by those at the top of the hierarchy, as well as those at the bottom. In *Pretty in Pink*, Blane's popular friends, as well as Andie's unpopular friends, all fight against the budding romance of the couple.

While the peers of the central couple create the conflicts in the films externally, the romantic couples must also face their own internal conflicts. Antagonism from their fellow students may cause the romantic partners to doubt their relationships. In order for a romantic relationship to be successful in these films, both of the partners must overcome their own fears of rejection. In *Pretty in Pink*, after Andie accepts Blane's invitation to the prom, he backs out because his friends make him feel foolish for dating a lower-class girl. Blane struggles with this situation because he is in love with Andie, despite his friends' taunting. In the end he overcomes his fear, stands up to his best friend Steff (James Spader), and asks Andie to dance at the prom, signifying his wish to continue his relationship with her. Stacy in *Fast Times* must also come to a similar decision. She realizes that Mark is the boy she wants to date, even though others, such as her friend Linda, don't consider him cool enough.

In teen romantic comedies, the teen characters actively create conflict for the films' couples. But the adults in the films sometimes provide a source of conflict as well, often unintentionally. The adults in these films that most fill this role are the parents. For the most part, parents in these films are inadequate in some way or absent altogether. For instance, in *Valley Girl* one of Julie's friends, Suzie (Michelle Meyrink),

and her stepmother Beth (Lee Purcell) compete over the same high school boy's affections. Parents of the lower classes also prove to be less than perfect in these films. Andie's father (Harry Dean Stanton) in *Pretty in Pink* has never recovered from his wife's desertion of himself and their daughter. He turns to alcohol for solace and is unable to hold down a job. After Kid gets into a fight at school in *House Party*, his single, overworked father (Robin Harris) grounds him, putting a kink in his plans to go to Play's party that evening. Although parents can stand in the way of the teens' happiness, their absence can also add to their children's ability to have fun. As Jonathan Bernstein puts it, "How many hundreds of films used 'my parents are away for the weekend' as a plot point?" (4). Homes without parents usually meant wild high school parties in these films.

Once the conflicts in each of the films are put into motion, they are intensified throughout the film. Being a subgenre of the romantic comedy, one of the typical ways to intensify the conflict of the hero or heroine's quest to find true love is through a romantic triangle. In *Valley Girl*, one of the obstacles standing in Julie and Randy's path to true love is Julie's ex-boyfriend Tommy (Michael Bowen), who still wants Julie to be his girlfriend. Sometimes the love triangles even get a little more complicated. In *Better Off Dead*, Lane is dumped by his girlfriend for a more popular skier, yet he continues to pine away for her. Meanwhile a French exchange student, Monique (Diane Franklin), who is staying with his neighbors, develops a crush for Lane, and in turn the neighbor's son claims Monique as his girlfriend. The love triangle in *Say Anything* takes a slightly

different turn - Lloyd must compete with Diane's father (John Mahoney) for her affections.

Other factors may also intensify the conflict. One such factor is peer pressure. When the two young lovers are from different positions in the high school caste system, their peers may try to keep them apart. Sometimes the two will initially become a couple, but then later be split apart due to peer pressure. In *Valley Girl*, Julie and Randy's relationship seems to be moving along well until her friends persuade her that Randy is wrong for her and that she should go back to Tommy. Much the same situation occurs in *Pretty in Pink*, except in this case both Andie and Blane's friends are against the match.

At some point the conflict of the film becomes so intense that it appears to be impossible to overcome. When this happens the conflict must be resolved in a way that clearly removes any threat to the couple's happiness. In *Sixteen Candles*, Jake confides in the Geek (Anthony Michael Hall), telling him that he is looking for the love which he does not have with his present girlfriend, and the Geek encourages him to pursue Sam. The final shot of the film is a freeze frame of Samantha and Jake kissing, emphasizing that they have successfully overcome the obstacles to their becoming a couple. At the end of *Heathers*, Veronica befriends outcast Martha "Dumptruck" (Carrie Lynn), thereby putting an end to the reign of the popular crowd over the school.

There are a few other conventions of the teen romantic comedy not mentioned in the outline above. For instance, a high school party or dance (often the prom), if not

both, usually takes place in these films. In *Sixteen Candles* the huge event of the evening is a school dance, after which Jake holds a wild party at his house because his parents are out of town. Of course, the title party of *House Party* is the main happening of the entire film. The parties and dances in teen romantic comedies serve various functions. The action of *Fast Times* takes place over the course of a school year, and the dance near the end of the film signifies the end of that school year as well as the film itself. Another function of the teen social gathering in some of the films is to demonstrate the social hierarchy of the high school at work. For instance, at the dance in *Can't Buy Me Love*, the line between the popular and unpopular groups is clearly drawn, with the popular students at the center of the dance floor and the nerds (Ronald's former friends) sitting in the bleachers on the outskirts. These social gatherings can also serve the purpose of bringing teens together. Both *Valley Girl* and *Pretty in Pink* end with the main couples reuniting at the prom.

The teen romantic comedies also achieve humor in similar ways throughout the subgenre, creating a convention. One typical way to bring comedy into the plots of these films is through secondary characters whose main function is comic relief. Some of these humorous characters include Jeff Spicoli (Sean Penn) in *Fast Times*, the Geek and Long Duk Dong (Gedde Watanabe) in *Sixteen Candles*, Charles (Curtis Armstrong) in *Better Off Dead*, Duckie (Jon Cryer) and Iona (Annie Potts) in *Pretty in Pink*, and Bilal (Martin Lawrence) in *House Party*. Another way that humor is included in the films is by exaggerating to absurdity the "realities" of the film's world. For example, in *Better Off Dead*, when the boy who delivers the newspaper to Lane's family wants to collect his

payment, he chases Lane on his bike. When this does not work, he rounds up a gang of newspaper delivery boys who chase Lane through the dark city, and eventually down a ski slope during a competition, all the while chanting, "\$2.00," over and over.

Another convention of the teen romantic comedy subgenre is that the same actors, directors, and writers appear throughout. Of course writer/director John Hughes and his star Molly Ringwald are staples of the subgenre. Other important players are John Cusack (*Sixteen Candles*, *Better Off Dead*, and *Say Anything*), Eric Stoltz (*Fast Times* and *Say Anything*), and Nicolas Cage (*Fast Times* and *Valley Girl*). Even minor actors in these films reappear; actress Amanda Wyss plays the role of dumping boyfriends Brad in *Fast Times* and Lane in *Better Off Dead*.

Now that the conventions of this subgenre of teen films have been explained, the question remains: Why were these films so abundant in the 1980s? Two different factors help answer this question. The first part has to do with the industry's drive to produce the films, and the second with the audience's desire to see the films.

Why did the industry produce so many teen films, especially teen romantic comedies, during the 1980s? As explained earlier, the studios were interested in making money, and the audience seemed interested in seeing teen romantic comedies, as evidenced through ticket sales for these films. Even though teen romantic comedies did not make as much money as the big blockbusters (in 1984 *Sixteen Candles* made only \$9.6 million while *Ghostbusters* raked in \$127 million), they also did not cost as much to make ("Big Rental Films of 1984" 16). *House Party* was made for \$2.5 million and

grossed over \$4 million in its first weekend of release (Alfred 23). For the most part, the actors, directors, and writers of the films had little previous experience and were not among the highest paid in the industry. Molly Ringwald reportedly earned \$1 million for *The Pick-up Artist* (James Toback, 1987), only after proving her marketability in three of John Hughes' films (Corliss, "Well, Hello Molly" 71).

The casts and crews of the films were also eager to make these films. For the young actors these films provided great exposure. As Reed says, "The importance of these pictures as launching pads for really good, very young, very inexperienced actors cannot be overestimated" (150). These films often serve as a launching pad for young directors as well. Out of the nine films used in this study, only one, *Can't Buy Me Love*, was not its director's first feature film. In an article on female directors (including both Amy Heckerling and Martha Coolidge), Zina Klapper writes that the teen film is a common route for directors to take on their way to the top: "After *Fast Times*, Heckerling followed some of her male counterparts out of the low-budget teen comedy ghetto, and into directing some of Hollywood's most popular comedy actors . . ." (106). Some of the writers and directors may also have another reason to make teen romantic comedies: a need to relive their own high school years. As Corliss puts it, "Who wouldn't grab the chance to remake one's adolescence, in which the geek in one's closet now has the swagger of fearless charm . . ." ("Well, Hello Molly" 69). Writer Cameron Crowe even quit his job at *Rolling Stone* to go back to high school for a year to research the book *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, which he later turned into the screenplay for the film (Paul 177).

So, movie studios made so many teen romantic comedies in the 80s because the audience kept paying to see them. But why did these films appeal to the teen audience? As with any genre, the teen romantic comedy provides a safe escape for its audience. The teens can relate to the characters on screen and vicariously live through them, perhaps even live a better, more exciting life in which the guy always gets girl in the end. These films also provide teenagers with something they can claim as their own. Psychologist Erik Erikson writes that in today's society, the position of the adolescent is unsure, the adolescent is neither child nor adult, and he or she may cling to an "adolescent subculture" in an attempt to establish an identity (128). Viewing these films can provide a link to that subculture. Studies have even been done to determine what teenagers pay to see in a film. After four months of study, Julian Myers came up with some qualities that teens look for. He found that: "The kids want to go through a passionate experience vicariously so that they can walk out of the theater feeling they've had the experience without having to undergo any of the dangers and without having violated their own ethical or moral standards" (Albert 92). Teen romantic comedies fulfill this need for teenagers.

Teen romantic comedies, while giving their audience an outlet for escape, also provide a glimpse of the "ideal teen" of the 80s. This prototype of the "ideal teen" both influences and is influenced by the teen audience. What qualities does the ideal teen in these films possess, and what do these qualities reflect about the culture of the 80s?

As stated earlier, the teen hero/heroine of the teen romantic comedy seeks true love rather than sex only. Although sex in these films is still regarded in a more casual way than it is today, there is a movement in these films away from sex without love. This movement takes place throughout the decade, perhaps due to the growing awareness of AIDS during the decade. In films made earlier in the decade, such as *Fast Times*, *Valley Girl*, and *Sixteen Candles*, there is still a somewhat casual attitude toward sex (although *Fast Times* does take a more serious look at the consequences of unprotected sex), but by the end of the decade, the films begin to take a different view of sex, including the statement made in *House Party* about the importance of safe sex when Kid and Sidney abstain because they are without any means of protection.

One of the most interesting attributes of the ideal teen of these films is the rejection of the traditional caste system of high school. Through their romantic relationships each of the films' main characters stands up to the caste system and finds happiness in the end. The heroes place importance on the individual qualities of a person rather than their place in the caste system. On the other hand, the villains of the films are often the characters who are unwilling to abandon the caste system, such as Steff in *Pretty in Pink* and the title character of *Heathers*. This rejection of a hierarchy based on artificial standards like wealth, appearance, and social class is even more important when viewed in the light of the culture that existed in the U.S. at the time when these films were made.

The 80s are often characterized as a time of greed, when most Americans were concerned with making money and gaining social prominence. These films can be seen as a rejection of this greedy attitude of the 80s. The teen protagonists of the films disagree with the notion that a person's worth should be determined by their popularity, and instead allow their hearts to lead them. If this view is extended to the culture in general, it seems to support a shift away from a society that values wealth and upper class position. For the most part these attributes are beyond the control of teenagers. Teenagers often feel powerless anyway, and thinking that they are being judged for something that is out of their hands can be overwhelming.

This feeling of helplessness could be another possibility for why teens were attracted to the teen romantic comedies of the 80s. The teens in the films, like the teens in the audience, are victims of the caste system at the beginning of the films. But by the end of each film, the heroes overcome the caste system. This success on screen could either provide the audience with hope for the same success in their own lives, or at least a temporary escape from their feeling of powerlessness to change the situation.

But even though teen romantic comedies were all the rage for several years, in the late 80s their popularity waned, and the subgenre appeared to have come to an end. There are a few possible explanations for this decline. One possible reason for their decline could be that the films released in the later years did not contain enough new elements to keep the subgenre fresh. Thus, the audience stopped going to see the films, leading the studios to stop making them. Another possible explanation is that the

audience for the films grew up and needed a different type of story. Besides that, the new teenagers coming of age in the late 80s may have been looking for different elements in their own teen films.

The end of the 80s may have seemed like the end of the teen romantic comedies, but their legacy lives on. Jonathan Bernstein writes in his book about teen films of the 1980s:

A decade after its release you've got Courtney Love in *Spin*, trumpeting *The Breakfast Club* as "the defining moment of the 'alternative' generation." You've got Sponge in the Buzz Bin with "Molly (Sixteen Candles)" (even though they swear it's not about La Ringwald). You've got the novels *Boy Culture* (by Matthew Rettenmund) and *Our Noise* (by Jeff Gomez) referencing *The Breakfast Club* as a significant teenage touchstone . . . You've even got the *Weird Science* syndicated TV show. Okay, I know it's not a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy, but it's something of an indication that the Hughes movies seeped into the consciousness of their intended audience and that their influence continues to be felt. (55)

Vernon Silver even views these films as the new cult classics. He credits part of the longevity of these films to the spread in the early 80s of the VCR and cable television. He claims that films that would have previously faded into obscurity now live on through these two technological advances. The children of the 80s still look back fondly on the

films of their youth and use them as a method of socializing. Silver goes on to describe college students getting together in dorm rooms to watch these films on video while reciting every line along with them, as well as John Hughes visiting his college-age son's campus while a festival of his films was being held (24).

A new breed of teen films in the 90s is also keeping the teen romantic comedy subgenre alive. Although *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) really gave the teen film genre in general a big boost, romantic comedies have also been included in the new interest in the teen audience. Amy Heckerling returned to the teen romantic comedy in 1995 with *Clueless*, a modern update of Jane Austen's *Emma*, and more recent films such as *She's All That*, which reached #1 at the box office, seem to be continuing the subgenre. The stories may still follow the same formula, but the films have a 90s sensibility (AIDS awareness, homosexuality), as well as fresh faces that appeal to a new teen audience. Perhaps this cycle will come to an end soon as well, but it could always return again in a slightly different form.

Works Cited

- Albert, Dora. "Youth May Be Wasted on Young But Its Appeal Is Showbiz Asset If You Understand What It Is." *Variety* Jan. 16, 1985: 7, 92.
- Alfred, Bruce. "House Party." *Cineaste* Vol. XVIII, No. 1, 1990: 23.
- Bernstein, Jonathan. *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*. NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.
- "Big Rental Films of 1982." *Variety* Jan. 12, 1983: 13.
- "Big Rental Films of 1984." *Variety* Jan. 16, 1985: 16.
- Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Corliss, Richard. "Is There Life After Teenpix?" *Time* Feb. 18, 1985: 90.
- Corliss, Richard. "Well, Hello Molly!" *Time* May 26, 1986: 66-71.
- Cowin, Dana B. "The Not-so-Fast Times of Amy Heckerling." *Vogue* Jan. 1985: 48.
- Doherty, Thomas. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1988.
- Douglas, Susan J. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. NY: Random House, Inc., 1994.

Erikson, Erik. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1968.

Glicksman, Marlaine. "They Gotta Have It." *Film Comment* May/Jun. 1990: 65-69.

Klapper, Zina. "Movie Directors: Four Women Who Get to Call the Shots in Hollywood." *Ms.* Nov. 1985: 62, 65-66, 105-107.

Kroll, Jack. "Fast Times at Ridgemont High." *Newsweek* Sept. 20, 1982: 92.

Lewis, Jon. *The Road to Romance and Ruin*. NY and London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1992.

McGuigan, Cathleen. "Rock Music Goes Hollywood." *Newsweek* Mar. 11, 1985: 78.

O'Connor, Thomas. "John Hughes: His Movies Speak to Teen-Agers." *The New York Times* Mar. 9, 1986: Sec 2: 14.

Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*. NY: Columbia UP, 1994.

Reed, Joseph. *American Scenarios: The Uses of Film Genre*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1989.

Ringwald, Molly. "Molly Ringwald Interviews Hit Filmmaker John Hughes." *Seventeen* Mar. 1986: 226-228, 238-240.

Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981.

Shary, Timothy. "The Teen Film and Its Methods of Study." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Spr. 1997: 38-45.

Silver, Vernon. "A New Breed of Cult Favorites for a New Generation." *The New York Times* Nov. 20, 1994: Sec. 2: 24.

Speed, Lesley. "Tuesday's Gone: The Nostalgic Teen Film." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Spr. 1998: 24-32.

Thompson, Anne. "Field of Dream\$: The 15th Annual Grosses Gloss." *Film Comment*. Mar/Apr 1990: 59-64.

Thompson, Anne. "Industry: The 13th Annual Grosses Gloss." *Film Comment*. Mar/Apr 1988: 56-62.

Thompson, Anne. "Industry: The 12th Annual Grosses Gloss." *Film Comment*. Mar/Apr 1987: 62-69.

Thompson, Anne. "Industry: The 10th Annual Grosses Gloss." *Film Comment*. Mar/Apr 1986: 64-67.